

Lion

About 1500 years old. Stele. Conscientiously carved using limestone during the Northern Qi dynasty in China.



Stele | China, Northern Qi dynasty (550-577), Limestone

Background information

In Buddhism, the lion is a symbol of strength and protection. The lion is the protector of the Buddha and is found as sculptures at the entrances to many Chinese temples. These creatures are sometimes called “fu dogs” in the West. The Buddha is called the “Lion of the Shakyas” (because he was of the Shakya clan), and the delivery of his sermon is likened to a lion’s roar. Some of the Marks of a Great Man on the Buddha are metaphorically comparable with a lion’s traits – an immense torso and a jaw like that of a lion, for instance. Images of lions are also extensive in Southeast Asia as symbols of Buddhism.

The upper section of this stele shows Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, meditating under a canopy of snakes. The middle shows seated Buddha figures performing the *abhaya* and *vitarka* mudras (symbolic hand gestures). They are flanked by disciples and bodhisattvas. The stele was originally set in a cave temple. Chinese artists acquired the skills to cut temples out of rock and sculpt stone images from contacts with India.

Limestone looks natural thanks to its subtle range of colour and its rough surface. It has been used as a building material in many cultures. Sculptures created from limestone are more subject to weathering and erosion. Limestone is more difficult to polish than marble, but is also less expensive. The tools used to shape limestone are similar to those used to sculpt wood. Its appearance is also warmer than marble.

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Proposed Activities

STUDENTS WILL LEARN ABOUT

- Buddhist symbols
- Symbolism of Lions in Buddhist Art

GLOSSARY

Abhaya mudra is a hand gesture that signals fearlessness, peace, and protection.

Bodhisattva is a being who has attained enlightenment, but delays his entry into nirvana in order to help others attain it.

Limestone is a type of stone, usually off-white or gray, made from minerals, including calcium. Fossils are often found in limestone.

Stele refers to stone slab or pillar bearing an inscription or design, serving as a monument or marker.

Vitarka mudra is a hand gesture that represents the transmission of the teachings by the Buddha.

REFERENCES

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LOOKING ACTIVITIES

1. Count the number of lions you can find.
2. Look at how the lions are positioned. How do you think the lions feel?
3. Pose like the lions. How does it make you feel? Powerful or weak?
4. Describe the lions depicted in this object. Do they have manes? Do they have sharp teeth and claws? Can you see the shape of their eyes – are they small or big? What do you think the lions are touching? Do you see a figure underneath? Who could that be?
5. Compare the lions' pose to an animal you've seen. What animal does it remind you of?
6. Examine the material of this stele. Do you think its texture is smooth or rough? Do you think it would take a long or short time to create this sculpture? How old do you think this stele is?



MAKING ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a scene to show the lion's strength and its role as a protector.
2. Using clay, create a sculpture of a lion to show its strength and power. How would you pose it?
3. Use a bar of soap to carve a lion.



CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

English

What stories can you recall that depict lions as a symbol of something other than strength and power? (e.g., *Wizard of Oz* movie depicting the lion as timid).

Create a story based on the lions on the stele. Imagine the images on this stele as similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics. What is its story?

History

The stele was originally set in a cave temple. Why would temples have been set in caves during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period? When did Buddhism spread to China from India? What factors led to the rise of Buddhism?

Geography

Locate some cave temples in Asia. What are some of the famous cave temples in the world? Why might temples have been created in these locations?

Limestone is known to corrode more easily than other, harder stones. Why do you think it was chosen to create a religious sculpture?